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THE FUTURE OF EXTENSION, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC POLICY

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Paper

It's inherent in the human condition to make best possible use of one's resources. Persons with a high tally of years of experience rarely hesitate to cite their veteran status and draw on it.

With regard to extension and particularly Cooperative Extension, I fit the mold. I am quick to declare not only my long association, but my loyalty as well.

In 1923 at the age of nine I joined my first 4-H Club. It was the first club in my home community. My father was the leader. He found himself working closely with Banks Collings, the first county extension agent in Mercer county, Ohio.

Thereafter I took part in a variety of 4-H projects, attended the state convention and state fair, and then became a leader. I gave a clean-milk demonstration at the National Dairy Show, held in faraway Memphis, Tennessee. I had all the 4-H credentials.

At my alma mater, Ohio State University, I earned my board and keep by working in the extension farm management office. The office was the equivalent of UMC's mail-in records.

During my years with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington I was in almost constant touch with economists in Land-Grant universities, particularly those working in policy analysis and outlook. When I joined the faculty at UMC I quickly entered into extension activities. For 16 years I held a joint appointment, with 50 percent extension. It's relevant to the topic of this workshop that my field was marketing and policy -- really, public affairs.

The chronology, however, fails to do justice to either my identification with extension or my dedication to all it stands for. If I was invited to this session on grounds of presenting a dispassionate, objective review, I am miscast. I have just completed the writing of my memoirs, and at one point in the text I call extension the most radically innovative of all government activities

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for agriculture in this century. I do not reveal there the logic underlying my tribute. Perhaps my judgment is not so much logical as impressionistic or even romantic. It derives in part from my own experiences but also from a philosophy of education and especially of adult education.

Extension is education, even when done by demonstration rather than by books or even electronic wizardry. It is a part of the education family. But it is a distinctive species of education. Some of our puzzlements may arise as we try to view extension now generically, now specifically.

Three Features, or Roles, of Education

In my philosophical view education as we have embraced it in the United States has three features, or perhaps it can be said to play three roles. I begin with education as the democratization of knowledge.

Through countless ages of the past, knowledge of the workings of the universe -- the defining of a patterned regularity among phenomena that facilitates both anticipation (prediction) and control -- has been confined to a privileged class. Until the scientific revolution the class was a religious priesthood. Robed members of the caste could claim divination as their authority. We all know the story of Galileo and other heroes who broke the clerics' grip. Critics of today, however, can ask whether the battle has truly been won. Have we only converted to a secular priesthood? Our social class structure is still established in large measure on deftness with numbers, language, and technology.

I allege that here in Missouri, agricultural extension as broadly defined has set a good record of democratizing knowledge about agriculture (including home arts) and rural society. It has done so with a higher degree of success, in my judgment, than has been attained by the university's outreach in other fields, often directed to urban Missouri. University extension outside agriculture and home economics has tried hard but has not yet matched the long-established agricultural extension in proficiency.

But agricultural extension's battle has not been won permanently. It would be easy to suggest that under the stress of reduced funding Missouri's extension has been tempted to narrow its clientele and limit its range. I know of some staff members who really believe agricultural extension should be confined to commercial farmers, in disregard to both extension's service obligation and the dwindling number of those farmers. On the other hand, agricultural extension deserves the highest plaudits for having initiated MoFarms, a service to farmers in trouble. <u>That</u> is democratic, not elitist.

Likewise, I've heard Deans of Agriculture declare, when admitting that they are strapped for funds, "We can't be all things

to all people." Well, maybe we can't but it's extension's job to try. We don't start out negatively.

Secondly, education is threatening. All new knowledge is a threat to holders of old knowledge. It is particularly viewed in that light when political or social institutions built on previously held knowledge are imperiled by the new. I could believe that instruction about technology in farming is now accepted as readily as any kind of adult education in which Extension engages. It was not always so. When Mercer county, Ohio, got its first county extension agent he was not welcomed with universally open arms. And when a young Ohio State graduate named Charles Nicholson came to my home town to teach vocational agriculture to high school students and to farmers, he was greeted with a burning cross on his lawn. He was Roman Catholic, and he was about to undermine some of the lore in which the local farmers felt comfortable.

I add a footnote. Nick Nicholson taught farmers how to cull non-laying hens and keep bugs off potatoes, and within a year was warmly appreciated. Now in his 90s, he still has some fire, as I learned when I visited him this past summer.

I am delaying my comments on education on public policy, partly because I don't believe much is distinctive about that field. But I do admit that education on public policy retains more of the threat quality in the minds of many Missourians than is true of education about technology.

Thirdly, education is futuristic. Extension education is particularly so. I suggest that this feature is understood and appreciated least. And yet we admit routinely that extension education has a research base, and research is by its nature, or surely ought to be, futuristic. A good extension program is always probing to be prepared to solve the problems of tomorrow, not those of yesterday.

This quality notably fits education in public affairs. To be personal for a moment, no one sees himself as others see him, as the poet Robert Burns reminded us. But I dare to believe one of my better success records has been to anticipate what is about to happen. As a contemporary example, long before the Presidential election I suggested that the federal budget deficit would not only get priority of attention in the next Administration, but would prove much more difficult than candidates were willing to admit. The prediction is about to be validated. It will also be recognized before too long that the budget cannot be balanced without either increasing the tax revenue, or defaulting on commitments -- as I (and lots of others) said many moons ago.

I'm glad my record has been reasonably good. But I grant that this feature of education, and especially of extension education, is loaded with hazards. It's so easy to play at clairvoyance. In public affairs one's stock in trade is to publicize both emerging trends that will present social problems, and the future consequences

of current action. All well and good; but the probability ratio is low. There's good reason to be cautious and to resist the more speculative sketching of omens and portents.

In the paragraphs below I will comment on the present climate for public policy extension. The climate has not been very favorable recently, and one reason relates to the futuristic feature of education. It is regrettable that the posture of government during the 1980s has been notable for a near absence of futurism. There has been some in the environmental area including protection of soil and water; and for that I give credit to Peter Myers, the Missouri farmer who is Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. But the successive editions of the Economic Report of the President have been marked by complacency. Only a mild protest has been raised about the fiscal deficit and almost none about the trade deficit. It seems that no one in high authority has wanted to worry about where current policies lead.

A society that is neglectful or overconfident about its future, keeping its head in the sand, will have little regard for education about public affairs, including that conducted by any university's extension arm. Education is futuristic. If those to be educated are not, the educational effort falls flat.

Extension in Trouble

It disturbs me, as a defender of extension, to admit that extension is in trouble. Despite a glowing record over many decades, its funding dwindles. I do not detect any pervasive public rejection; it's more a case of apathy than of antagonism. I regret to say, though, that I sense a cold shoulder in intellectual circles. Scholars have always been tempted by the esoteric, in which they find reason for self-approbation. They seem to be sorely tempted these days; so they reject extension.

My friend Kenneth Farrell, Vice President of the University of California, tells me that the agricultural economics department there voted unanimously to abolish all extension work in the field. He used his veto power to reject the motion.

I attend an occasional professional meeting at which an extension delegate delivers his more or less boiler-plate talk about how extension has not lost its vitality. He usually offers his brand of admonition as to how to keep spirits up and programs functioning. Barry Flinchbaugh of Kansas State University, for example, gave such a rip-roaring talk at the Extension luncheon of the American Agricultural Economics Association meeting a couple of years ago.

Following such a moral-uplift talk I usually conclude that extension really is in trouble. Then I ask myself, Why? And I wonder what I would say if I were the invited speaker.

Unfortunately, I am by no means sure why extension has come upon harder times. Around UMC campus corridors I hear allegations that

the origin of problems in Missouri lies in the organization chart. I am skeptical. I grant that organizational structure can make a difference. And I offer my gratuitous comment that I wish the structure could be streamlined enough that when I read something about Gail Imig I do not have to leapfrog a long title identification that reads as though it came out of Gilbert and Sullivan. On the other hand, the pep talks I have heard, that by denying it so vigorously actually confirm that extension is in trouble, have all been delivered in states other than Missouri. So I doubt that our administrative structure explains much.

The Coquettish Quality of the Public Temper

It follows logically that if extension is losing some public acceptance, the underlying cause need not be internal. It can be chargeable to loss of support from those it serves or offers to serve. Here I make a second observation that also is gratuitous, and to me is more jarring than the first. I feel almost certain that there has been an attenuation of appreciation and respect for the educational services extension has to offer, and that it traces to a change in public temper. In a word, I don't like some of the changes in public mien and mores that I sense, and I believe them to be negative toward all education and particularly liberally enlightening kinds of educational efforts such as those of extension.

In my memoirs I have written that I feel myself fortunate that my prime years came during our nation's Golden Age. That period began in the heady exultation and commitment after World War II and continued through the Great Society years, that is, until the late 1960s. It bogged down in Vietnam, faded in the inflation-wracked 1970s, and was exterminated in the Reagan Revolution. To what extent the extinguishing of that bright spirit is explained by normal cyclicality in human affairs, or is just of matter of happenstance events, I cannot say. Books espousing the cyclicality thesis are numerous and some are popular. I have on my desk Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s <u>The Cycles of American History</u>; Mancur Olson's <u>The Rise and Decline of Nations</u>; and Paul Kennedy's <u>The Rise and Fall of Great Powers</u>. Isn't it significant that books of those titles should be written during the present decade -- <u>and read</u>?

I can easily believe that a society cannot be held, or hold itself, at a fever pitch indefinitely. If the 1980s, which will be known as the Reagan era, were a time when U.S. citizens took a holiday from social concerns, when a spirit close to anti-intellectualism could be detected, and when futuristic thinking was almost absent, it's possible that such an episode is inevitable in the course of human affairs. If so, it's merely a matter of chance that Ronald Reagan happened to be President. He fit the times.

Arthur Schlesinger believes the cycle will reverse in the 1990s. That could prove true.

Education in Public Affairs

Be all that as it may, I now set forth a few of my ideas about education in public policy.

As I have already said, I am not sure that it is implicitly a more difficult area than are others, even education about technology. I doubt it is any more difficult to tell family farmers that income tax concessions will kill family farming, as I have done countless times, than for an agronomist to declare that Monsanto's (or any company's) recommended rates of using a certain one of its products are twice too high. I will admit, though, that most of the subjects with which I have dealt are not targeted to a person, an organization, or a local jurisdiction. Usually, I have confined myself to national policies. I have never had occasion to teach about the economics of a Katy Trail or putting a sewage disposal pipe from the city of Columbia to the Missouri river. I've said more about the economics of energy, of commodity price supports, or of who will own and control agriculture. These are pretty impersonal, even remote. I have had to contend with prejudice (a word that means pre-judgment) but my instruction has rarely been viewed as a personal challenge.

At my retirement dinner I declared my great satisfaction in the reception I have had in policy education in Missouri. I explained, though, that I usually stayed fairly low key. I do not try to convince anyone, I said; I ask only to be listened to. And with few exceptions I have been able to enlist persons in my audience in debate without stirring antagonisms among them, or a rebuke to me.

There have been a few exceptions. I remember when, in the mid-1970s, I addressed a farm group in southeast-central Missouri. The times were about the best farmers have had in recent decades. Prices of almost every commodity were up. I carelessly suggested that I found it difficult to understand why farmers were complaining. They seemed almost to be paranoid, I added. Thereupon a nicely dressed lady sprang to her feet. "How can farmers keep from being paranoid when they have so much to be paranoid about?" she asked, testily. That word has never since escaped my lips.

An experience of more lasting consequence occurred at a workshop for commodity groups staged by the Missouri Farm Bureau. I was guilty of the indiscretion of telling the soybean people that promotion was not foremost among issues of the day. It was a time when soybean leaders were ecstatic about promotion programs. What I had in mind was that the integrity of markets is always first in rank. The soybean farmers did not want to hear that. I have never since been on a program of the Missouri Farm Bureau. Of course, Dick Johnston is not keen on economists, and my flub regarding soybeans may not be the only reason for my forced abstinence.

When all is said and done, I really have had only a couple of operating rules. One is that any issue in public affairs is so loaded with ancillary considerations that anyone working the field must be well prepared. I dread to see young economists, the ink

still wet on their Ph.D. certificate, go out and "educate" farmers about public affairs. After all, I dared to do so only after completing 30 years of apprenticeship in the Department of Agriculture.

I never went to a meeting unprepared. And if I were invited to take part in a session on a subject in which I was not comfortable, I declined. I allege that this is a good rule.

Another rule I followed was never to press my audience farther than it was willing to go. The rule is stated more easily than it is conformed to. But I tried to follow it.

The companion rule, however, is never to fudge or compromise on what one believes to be true. One reason I am still a little surprised that I got along reasonably well is that I never was willing to tell an audience only what it wanted to hear. In fact, I almost made it a point to nudge my listeners along a path they really did not want to take. But I nudged, I did not push; and, as I have just said, I didn't even point them to a path they would refuse to enter.

This leads to a phrase every Extension teacher knows so well. It's that of the teachable moment. I believe I was fairly skilled in sensing that moment. And when the moment passed for any one subject, I put my transparencies back in the file. I kept them, on the hunch that I would need them again some day.

I have just two more comments. One relates to what is known in agricultural economics circles as the Purdue Thesis. It is that those of us who do policy extension not only do not reveal our value judgments, but keep those judgments out of our analysis and presentation. All one does, Purdue tells us, is expose alternatives. Poppycock, I reply. One's values enter into even the choice of what is to be educated about. I have always tried to be objective and fair, but I have also preferred the tactic that when I think my values enter into what I say or write, I admit what they are. It may be surprising that my audiences/readers have responded favorably. They will accept candor, but not being misled.

Finally, I go back to futurism. If I had to put in a single sentence my judgment as to what will determine the future of university extension, it would relate to how well the extension institution can anticipate the problems and issues that will grip and perplex our nation and which, in turn, extension can have the competency to address. It follows, of course, that some effort will have to go into developing that competency.

If I had my druthers, at every annual conference, at a general session, the best available futurist would present his forecast of the social, political, and economic forces that will shape our state and national future. To be sure, if he is a competent wizard he will begin with a caveat about how risky the exercise is, with a probability factor of not more than 60 or perhaps 66-2/3 percent. But either number is higher than the 50 percent that is law of

chance, or the 40 or 33-1/3 percent that is the probability ratio for merely extrapolating the status quo.

Education in general -- as a genera -- is implicitly a democratic experience. It is by its nature threatening. And it is futuristic. In my judgment extension education -- the species -- is all three but it is, or ought to be, notably futuristic.